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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 ASHGABAT 000137

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [OSCE](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#) [US](#)
SUBJECT: EUR/ACE COORDINATOR ADAMS MEETS WITH
TURKMENISTAN'S FOREIGN MINISTER MEREDOV

REF: ASHGABAT 44

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.4 (B)
and (D).

Summary

11. (C) Turkmenistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashit Meredov on January 31 provided EUR/ACE Adams a well-targetted series of requests for expanded cooperation in the fields of education, health, economic reforms and security. Meredov acknowledged Adams's caveat that the U.S. Congress was unlikely to approve expanded cooperation without rule of law, democratic reform and significant improvement in Turkmenistan's human rights record. Meredov also promised to work with Charge to lessen bureaucracy and harassment connected with USG programs. Meredov's message to Adams clearly was that Turkmenistan wanted to "turn a page" in its relationship with the United States. Given Turkmenistan's abysmal track record with following through on its commitments, the USG needs to continue to calibrate its response to actual actions the government takes to reform the wreck of a country deceased President Niyazov left behind. There remains considerable cause for optimism, however, and Adams' delegation's working level meetings with a dozen ministries (septels) were far more constructive than expected. As embassy's local translator told Charge following the Meredov meeting, "maybe we should start to believe." End Summary.

Meredov - Turkmenistan Ready to Turn the Page

12. (C) Notwithstanding the complexity of the 13-person Adams delegation's schedule, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided uncharacteristic cooperation in organizing this meeting, as well as the the delegation's 9 other January 31 sessions with 11 ministers, the Speaker of the Parliament and the Head of the Electoral Commission (septels). In the meeting, Meredov was focused and intent on getting his message across to his U.S. visitors that Turkmenistan wanted

to enhance and increase cooperation.

Adams - Many Obstacles

13. (C) Adams responded that Washington, too, was interested in increasing cooperation and helping Turkmenistan with the challenges it faced. While there were profound differences in policy between the two governments, the United States wanted to work on resolving those differences. Washington had been encouraged by statements by Turkmenistan's presidential candidates promising reforms in education, health and other areas. The USG was willing to help Turkmenistan in promoting reform, but bureaucratic procedures within the Turkmenistan government had become an obstacle to increased assistance.

Evolutionary Change

15. (C) Adams stressed that, contrary to claims by some countries, U.S. assistance was not directed toward revolutionary change. The United States believed stable, peaceful evolutionary change was best for all. That said, the U.S. Government wanted to help Turkmenistan meet international standards, including on democracy and human rights. Claiming that Turkmenistan had followed a path of evolutionary, gradual reform since becoming independent in 1991, Meredov nonetheless was willing to listen to the delegation's proposals.

Meredov Proposes Areas for Cooperation

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16. (C) Claiming that ACCELS, IREX, Peace Corps and USAID had "quite good experience" working with Turkmenistan, Meredov suggested that their work could be used as a framework for new joint programs, including:

-- Economic sector: There had been a good USAID program carried out in coordination with the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF) to introduce international standards of accounting. The United States could discuss new projects or reactivate previous proposals in this area. In addition, U.S. agencies could assist Turkmenistan to improve its investment, budget and entrepreneur legislation and implementation of that legislation through joint meetings and education programs.

-- Energy: In the past there had been helpful (Department of Commerce) Sabit exchange programs to train energy, oil and gas professionals. Although specialists had received training for the General Electric-supplied equipment in Turkmenistan's power stations, the government welcomed additional practical exchanges of experience in the electricity field, as well as in the gas and oil sector.

-- Education: FLEX, Fulbright, Muskie, and the Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) program had provided a number of exchange opportunities at the secondary school, university, graduate and professorial levels. Meredov noted that, in presenting their platforms, presidential candidates had all paid substantial attention to education and had discussed increasing secondary education to 10 years and higher education to 5 years. In response to Charge's question, Meredov would not commit to starting the new program in the 2007-2008 school year, but said the government already was working on an implementation plan.

-- Healthcare: Meredov expressed his appreciation for the already good cooperation between the Ministry of Health and USAID and said the government would welcome additional proposals.

-- Defense, security and counter-narcotics cooperation:
Meredov also noted significant cooperation in these areas, including providing training, equipment including radiation portal monitors and forensic laboratory equipment, and the two USG-funded border stations on Turkmenistan's borders with Iran and Afghanistan. Meredov welcomed additional cooperation in all these areas.

-- Other areas: Turkmenistan had already started working with other governments in other areas, including agriculture and pension reform. In that context, Meredov had personally asked the United States and the Europeans for assistance in sending Turkmenistan agricultural specialists overseas for training and foreign specialists to Turkmenistan. The European countries had already started responding: TACIS had arranged for Turkmenistan experts to go to Cordoba University in Spain, and the Ministry of Agriculture had signed a protocol with Germany on development of long-term training courses at Turkmenistan's Agricultural University and an agricultural exchange program. This had been done within the past two weeks.

U.S. Proposals: Education, Internet, Health...and More

¶7. (C) Adams noted that all countries of the former Soviet Union had hit bumps in the road in making the transition to free markets and democracy. The United States wanted Turkmenistan to be a model, but there was much work ahead. He was encouraged to hear that Turkmenistan was returning to 10 years of mandatory education. The United States was interested in helping Turkmenistan to prepare a modern

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curriculum; indeed, USAID Regional Director Chris Crowley had identified funding for that purpose which would be available quickly -- but which would need to be used elsewhere if the two governments could not agree on a program soon. The delegation would discuss the proposal in its meeting with the Minister of Education.

¶8. (C) The United States had also been encouraged to hear that Turkmenistan would work toward greater Internet connectivity and was interested in helping increase Internet penetration in Turkmenistan. In fact, the United States already had established programs in Turkmenistan such as IATP and Global Connections, but implementation had been slow because of bureaucratic obstacles.

¶9. (C) Adams said the United States was willing to deepen its already significant cooperation in health fields -- including in addressing HIV/AIDS -- as well as in the economic, agricultural, security and law enforcement sectors. However, there were two restraints on increasing cooperation:

-- The excessive bureaucratic obstacles presented by the Government of Turkmenistan in approving and implementing projects; and

-- The U.S. Congress would demand to see democratic reform before it would provide additional funding. Adams noted, however, that Turkmenistan's overall assistance budget already was too low and that his office had successfully lobbied to get Turkmenistan an increase in the FY 2008 budget, the only country in Central Asia to receive an increase. Adams told Meredov he was glad to hear that, whatever the outcome of the presidential election, the Government of Turkmenistan was committed to move forward in a number of areas.

Work with OSCE Sends a Good Signal

¶10. (C) Noting that the Adams delegation had arrived together with the election support team from the OSCE's Office of Democratic Initiatives and Human Rights (ODIHR),

Adams saluted the decision to welcome the team to Turkmenistan. He urged Meredov to work constructively with the OSCE team to improve the election process and noted that USAID also had programs to assist in election reform.

U.S. Not Promoting an Orange Revolution

¶11. (C) Adams stressed that the United States wanted to be helpful in order to improve the democratic process in Turkmenistan. In contrast to the misinformation circulated about U.S. democracy assistance, the United States focused elections assistance only on projects such as training poll watchers and assisting with improving election laws. The United States did not pick winners or losers -- that was for the people of Turkmenistan to do. He noted that he was making this point because "others" had accused the United States of undermining the democratic processes in their countries. This was not true and, in fact, such activities would be illegal under U.S. law. The United States was not interested in creating an Orange Revolution in Turkmenistan, Adams said.

Easier Contacts and Border Travel

¶12. (C) Adams also stated that the United States wanted to continue working with Turkmenistan and the UNODC to fight the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan. Meredov responded that, notwithstanding media reports in neighboring countries claiming that Turkmenistan was complicit in trafficking, his government was working very hard, both domestically and

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internationally, to stem the flow. Meredov claimed that ethnic Turkmen in northern Afghanistan who felt a "spirit of solidarity" with their motherland were helping to interdict narcotics shipments and arrest traffickers. Adams suggested that Turkmenistan's reputation in this area suffered because the government did not share statistics on drug interdictions and drug use within the country. He encouraged Meredov to assist in establishing working level contacts between the U.S. Embassy in Ashgabat and relevant counter-narcotics bodies. He also urged Meredov to grant blanket clearance to U.S. Embassy officers involved with border security projects.

¶13. (C) Adams stated that cooperation was a two-way street. Just as the United States benefited by sending Americans to Turkmenistan to learn more about the country's rich history and culture, Turkmenistan benefited from sending its citizens to the United States. He repeated that there was a willingness among the international community to assist Turkmenistan, but time was money. Eliminating bureaucratic obstacles to cooperation was essential.

Menarchik Reaffirms USAID Commitment to Cooperation

¶14. (C) Delegation member USAID Acting Assistant Administrator Douglas Menarchik noted that the USAID presence in Turkmenistan was relatively small. Programs were sprinkled across a variety of development sectors, but it would be possible to thicken those programs quickly if Turkmenistan agreed. However, programs would be most effective if there were memoranda of understanding (MOUs) for their implementation. He promised that he and USAID Regional Director Crowley would develop concrete proposals where USAID could increase its programs. He reinforced Adams by insisting there also needed to be close cooperation at the working level in order to break through bureaucratic obstacles to USAID's work.

Hope to Expand IMET

¶15. (C) Noting that there had not been much discussion of security assistance in the meeting, delegation member DOD Office of the Secretary of Defense Central Asia Policy Officer Clark Adams thanked Meredov for Turkmenistan's assistance in the war on terrorism, and in fighting narcotics trafficking and combating WMD proliferation. He said he hoped it would be possible to increase cooperation in International Military Education and Training (IMET) and other programs.

Meredov Promises to Discuss Bureaucratic Problems

¶16. (C) In response to Adams's request for less bureaucracy and more direct working level contact, Meredov agreed on the need to re-examine procedures and said he would discuss possible improvements with the Charge.

Comment

¶17. (C) Meredov is continuing to be less "lawerly" and much statesmanlike during his meetings with the USG. Other long-time observers in town agree that Meredov has been liberated from his previous subservience to Niyazov and is becoming not only an independent decision-maker, but clearly one of the most important men in the new Turkmenistan. In addition to the very upbeat meeting with Meredov, his staff organized a truly responsive first class reception for the delegation, both scheduling a full day of simultaneous meetings, but also organizing three simultaneous visits to the provinces on February 2. Circumstances since Niyazov's

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death are clearly changed, though any significant changes in the USG's bilateral relationship with Turkmenistan remain at the discussion stage. Embassy will follow up on the minister's proposals, as well as proposals floated during meetings at other ministries and will continue to welcome delegations who can reinforce the USG's interest in slow but sure change for the better in this critical part of the world. End Comment.

BRUSH